RESEARCHING 'AUTONOMY WITH ACCOUNTABILITY' IN SCHOOLS: A QUALITATIVE APPROACH TO POLICY ENACTMENT AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

This paper presents the methodological approach of the REFORMED project research strand 2 (RS2), specifically, of its qualitative phase. Following a sequential mixed-methods design approach, the qualitative phase aimed to understand the rationales behind different forms of engagement of schools with SAWA policies. The main emphasis is placed on how these policies are interpreted and translated into practice by school actors in different educational and socio-material realities. The main aim of this note is threefold. First, it describes the research objectives and presents an overview of the research design. Second, it presents the data-collection and data-analysis strategies, with a focus on the coding of the interviews. Finally, it reflects on research challenges and points out possible future steps of the study.

1. Research background

In recent decades, School Autonomy with Accountability (SAWA) policies have spread worldwide. SAWA policies have a strong presence in global education debates and are being constantly adopted, adjusted, and implemented in countries with variegated levels of economic development and different administrative traditions. It is also a policy approach that receives bipartisan support since both left- and right-leaning governments are adopting them, although not necessarily for the same reasons (Teltemann & Jude 2019, Verger, et al., 2019). Paradoxically, despite the global popularity of SAWA policies, existing evidence shows inconclusive results concerning its potential benefits in education quality and equity. Evidence regarding the behavioural effects of SAWA and the way these policies operate on the ground is also mixed and far from conclusive.

SAWA policies are expected to favour educational innovation, efficiency, effectiveness, and team cohesion within schools (see Levatino, 2021). Despite SAWA policies may emphasise different objectives, they share some general premises about how these policies are expected to work, and in which direction. Specifically, the SAWA theory of change (ToC) includes the following premisses:

- Accountability is one of the main dimensions of the SAWA program, but more than a single or specific policy, accountability is a 'policy mix' or a 'system' that combines different instruments. As

shown in Figure 1, accountability systems combine national large-scale assessments (NLSAs) to measure student achievement in different subjects, data infrastructures, monitoring systems, and corrective measures of a different nature. At the school level, performance data is expected to work as an actionable input, enabling different uses that inform subsequent school improvements. Performance data can contribute to rethinking instructional strategies, identifying groups of students that require additional support, making decisions on teacher in-service training, and enhancing overall learning achievements.

- Following the SAWA ToC, school actors (principals and teachers) have the greatest responsibility in ensuring students' learning achievement. NLSAs are key to holding both schools and school actors accountable for educational quality (Gouëdard, 2021). Data deriving from NLSAs achieve their accountability function when combined with some level of consequences and corrective measures for schools not achieving satisfactory performance levels (Levatino et al., 2024). Diverse incentive structures—from material to reputational and symbolic—are pivotal in promoting teacher motivation and self-efficacy, and making teachers focus on improving students' learning.

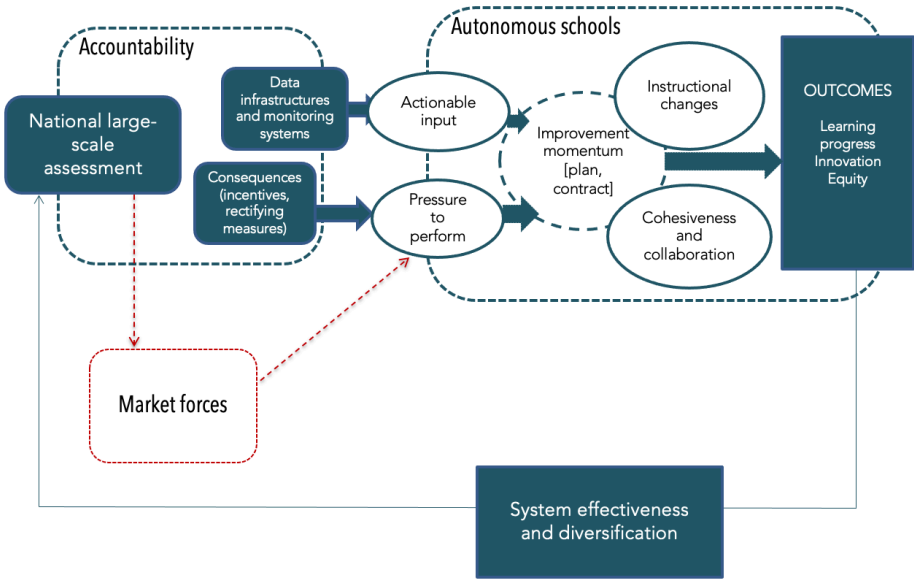
- The 'improvement momentum' refers to the push for change in which schools channel the input of the accountability system. It usually crystallizes in several actions through which school actors, usually with the close monitoring of inspectors or other public educational authorities, define an improvement strategy. This strategy (in the form of a school plan, or a contract between the school and educational authorities) includes performance, but also other types of goals (inclusion, living together, etc) and identifies key educational problems and areas of intervention, together with the specific activities and tasks to address them.

- According to the SAWA ToC, positive changes in educational practices can be notably advantageous when performance pressures are combined with school autonomy. Greater levels of autonomy are supposed to engender locally adapted and context-sensitive pedagogy within schools, and are a necessary condition for schools to address potential performance issues and learning gaps. Pedagogical autonomy enables schools to adapt the curriculum to their educational project and adapt educational practices to their 'situated contexts' (*cf.* Ball et al., 2012). These policies make schools more responsive and attuned to students' (and parents') needs, preferences, and demands by circumventing bureaucratic constraints of centralized modes of education governance. Whereas managerial school autonomy is expected to empower principals' decision-making concerning staffing policy (recruitment, inception, appraisal, etc.), foster team cohesion and the alignment between teachers' work and the school's educational project, methodology, and mission. Overall, the combined effect of pedagogical and managerial autonomy can facilitate teacher collaboration and strengthen teachers' capacity to adapt and design specific teaching materials and instructional strategies, thereby elevating teachers' professional satisfaction and self-efficacy (Levatino, 2021).

- Finally, SAWA policies have a dynamic interaction with market forces. In contexts where SAWA policies (through the publication of test results, rankings and school browsers) are combined with school choice and demand-based funding schemes (e.g., vouchers, public subsidies for private schools), market forces will boost schools' and individuals' reputational and material pressures to perform, intensifying thus accountability pressure. Relatedly, schools that exhibit higher receptivity to students' needs and parents' educational preferences are more likely to stimulate pedagogical innovation, culminating in a more diversified educational market.

Figure 1 brings together these different premises in a general ToC of SAWA policy, in which the main causal relations of the programme ontology are graphically represented.

Figure 1. SAWA general theory of change



Source: own elaboration

However, despite the SAWA's ToC main premises and intentions, existing literature has observed that performance pressures on schools, particularly in high-stakes settings (although increasingly in low-stakes ones), can lead to undesired or unforeseen behaviours such as curriculum narrowing, teaching to the test, cream-skimming, and students' triage (Au, 2007; Darling-Hammond, 2004; Levatino, et al., 2023). In this context, the REFORMED project aims to explore **why, how, and under what circumstances school autonomy with accountability (SAWA) policies are adopted and enacted in different countries at both the regulatory and practice levels.** The country sample of the project includes Chile, Norway, Spain (Madrid and Catalonia), the Netherlands and Italy. The REFORMED project is structured into two main (and interrelated) research strands: the first research strand (RS1) examines the diffusion and adoption of SAWA policies at the country level, whereas the second research strand (RS2) analyses the recontextualization of SAWA policies in schools.

This qualitative methodological note is part of RS2, which follows a sequential mixed-methods approach (Quantitative-Qualitative) to explore the enactment of SAWA policies by principals and teachers in a representative sample of schools. This research strand inquiries into the complex relationship between SAWA policies, institutional, social and material contingencies, and policy enactment processes, and is guided by a realist evaluation approach (Pawson & Tilley, 1997) through which we aim to test how the SAWA ToC operates in practice (i.e. how, why, under what circumstances and for whom do SAWA policies work). The specific objectives of this research strand are to:

O1. Analyse how teachers and principals enact SAWA policies, from a comparative perspective, in different regulatory settings.
O2. Explore how the institutional design of SAWA policies has the potential to activate/inhibit a series of undesired effects at the school level.
O3. Analyse the impact of SAWA policies on educational and organisational practices in different school contexts.

The main aim of this document is to describe the methodological approach, the main theories in which this approach is grounded, as well as the tools used to support data collection and data analysis in the countries included in the sample.

2. Theoretical underpinnings

Processes of policy implementation in schools are influenced by a mix of socioeconomic factors, organisational characteristics, and subjective elements. Sociological approaches to education policy implementation tend to emphasize the importance of school context(s) in understanding how policies are received and processed by schools, and with what outcomes. Some of the most relevant contextual factors that are considered in implementation literature include the socio-economic composition of the student body, the school location and history, the position that the school occupies in the local education market, and the material conditions in which schools operate (in terms of, for instance, budget, facilities, staff, and so on) (Braun et al 2011).

Our research approach acknowledges that these contextual factors are key in processes of policy implementation and aims to understand how they interact with processes of both policy sensemaking, filtering and adaptation that operate within educational institutions. Our approach emphasizes the importance of understanding how policies are enacted in real-world contexts, and how they interact with other social practices, institutional arrangements and external stimuli. By focusing on the concrete and

everyday practices of schools at both educational and organisational levels, we aim to capture the informal norms, notions, and routines that shape policy implementation, and their variegated policy outcomes. Indeed, our perspective emphasizes the need to consider the diverse ways in which policy is interpreted and adapted by different school actors and to examine the complex relationships and power dynamics that underpin these dynamics. Overall, our study is grounded on a research tradition that challenges traditional approaches to policy implementation – such as those that focus primarily on policy design and formal institutions - and calls for a more nuanced and context-sensitive understanding of how policies are put into effect in practice. Following Levinson et al. (2009), we consider that "[t]he way to unpack policy is to see it as a kind of social practice, specifically, a practice of power" (p. 767). In our view, sense-making and institutional theories can contribute to developing this research agenda. Both theories are functional for carrying out articulated analyses of how schools engage with and apply SAWA, and the role of subjectivity therein. As we show next, our analytical model is not only informed by these two theoretical perspectives, but by their cross-fertilization.

Sensemaking theories – including so-called cognitive policy analysis and policy enactment theory – provide insights into how school actors understand external pressures and construct appropriate responses accordingly (Jennings, 2010). Such theories broadly state that the way educational actors interpret and make sense of new policy mandates is key to explaining how such mandates translate into everyday practices (Ball et al., 2012; Rigby, 2015; Spillane et al., 2002). School actors actively adapt, modify, and reframe policy prerogatives to suit their preferences as well as the needs and constraints they face in their school contexts. Teachers and principals, instead of being simple policy takers, are thus active policy shapers. Principled beliefs, personal biographies, previous experiences, and emotional scripts co-constitute the interpretive frames through which educators approach and respond to educational policy (Coburn, 2001, 2005; Reinhorn, et al., 2017). Interpretation is a collective process resulting from interactions produced within the school, but also through interactions with actors from their environment, including school inspectors, external consultants, neighbourhood schools, experts, and so on (Rigby, 2015; Spillane et al., 2002).

Policy interpretation is a key moment in the articulation of school responses to external policy stimuli. School actors will tend to align with new policy mandates when they agree with the policy, but also if such policies easily couple with their previous operating method and/or their particular or collective interests (Malen, 2006). Teachers and principals will not adhere to a policy if they believe this policy goes against their professional values and educational beliefs, as they actively mediate messages about appropriate behaviour from the policy environment through their pre-existing notions and worldviews (Coburn, 2004). Overall, policy agreement and disagreement, or consent and dissent, are related to considerations of usefulness, validity and/or fairness. When negative interpretations predominate, schools may address external pressure to comply with new regulations through dilution strategies and obstructive bureaucratic games (Malen, 2006; Maroy et al., 2021).

Attitudes, as well as principled and causal beliefs, dispose actors to act in a certain way under given circumstances (Nash, 2003; Borghini & Williams, 2008). Nonetheless, school actors' beliefs are not sufficient to capture the polymorphic nature of school responses to policy interventions. Institutional scholars coined the concept of decoupling to capture another mechanism through which policy implementation processes operate. According to institutional theory, the higher the level of pressure that policies exert on subjects, the more frequently these subjects will adopt tactical or symbolic responses to cope with and escape from pressure (Boxenbaum & Jonsson, 2016). For instance, research conducted in high-stakes accountability settings often concludes that schools on probation are more prone to adopting instructional tactics (such as teaching to the test or narrowing the curriculum down to assessed subjects) to inflate test results. This allows schools to avoid coercive sanctions without necessarily changing their pedagogy and core educational and organisational processes (Mittleman & Jennings, 2018), so they can continue doing "business as usual" (Hallett, 2010). Decoupling theory predicts that many schools will resolve the conflict between external pressure and their organisational preferences more often through avoidance, shortcuts, and symbolic responses than through open resistance or confrontative strategies (Rowan & Miskel 1999). However, the external demands experienced by schools have diversified so much in the last decades, and are currently so prevalent that it might not be so easy for school actors to insulate from their environment - at least at the same level that they did years ago. For this reason, institutional theory has evolved to better equip itself to capture how schools respond to the wider range of institutional and societal pressures they face.

New theory approaches, such as the one advanced by Diehl and Golann (2023), incorporate premises of policy sociology and enactment research to institutional theory to better understand how schools, and the individuals therein, navigate multiple institutional logics and sources of pressure (see also Dulude & Milley 2021). They do so by focusing on how schools *filter* and *adapt* these pressures to their organisational reality and educational practice. To these authors, filtering refers to the processes through which several aspects of the environment enter school organizations, whereas adaptation refers to the active role of the members of these organizations in incorporating the filtered aspects into their daily lives. Routines, networks, and sensemaking processes are key to understanding how filtering and adaptation operate in practice (Diehl & Golann, 2023). Previously, other scholars have combined sense-making and institutional theory to show that, in the face of increasing accountability demands, school principals will tend to design and adopt new organisational routines for examining student performance data, assign staff members to report these data, and/or create teacher committees to take related decisions (Spillane et al., 2011). The level of adoption – and sense of urgency - of these measures will be different if schools are (or are not) on probation, but will also vary depending on how school actors' experience external pressure and their level of adhesion to the accountability policy in place (Verger et al., 2021). Finally, the existing networks of collaboration and support within schools, including those that prevail among teachers, will also contribute to filtering how much importance schools give to accountability demands in relation to other societal demands, and how they

translate them into specific educational practices and organisational routines (Diehl & Golann 2023).

Making sense of the policy environment, on the one hand, and *filtering* external policy pressures, on the other, are two analytically distinguishable mechanisms, but they operate simultaneously in real education settings. Instead of behaving as two different entities, filtering and interpretation processes influence – and to a great extent constitute - each other: on the one hand, external pressure is not a given, but rather something that, for several reasons, school actors experience, process and modulate differently; on the other, policy interpretation is a cognitive process that significantly intervenes in how and why schools filter external demands and incorporate them to their organizations with different levels of fidelity. This implies that, on occasion, schools decouple practice from structure, but we do not assume this is a predominant organisational response. Rather, a much broader range of school responses can manifest in contemporary educational systems. As we detail below, our data-collection and analytical strategy has been carefully designed to capture the key intervention of sense-making and filtering mechanisms in SAWA implementation, and the interaction between both mechanisms.

3. Overview of the research design

3.1. Data-collection procedures

The qualitative phase of the RS2 follows a multiple-case study approach (Yin, 2009) and mainly draws on semi-structured interviews with principals and teachers, which are complemented by documentary analysis (School's institutional project, school websites, reports from inspection services, etc.) and ethnographic fieldnotes. Our research is informed by an integrative multi-method approach that, by combining comparative and case-study designs, and methods such as interviews, content analysis, and survey data, can improve causal inference.

Following the sequential logic of the research design, the selection of the schools in each country was based on the results and typologies derived from the analysis of the REFORMED survey and/or administrative data about schools. Although the selection criteria varied slightly from country to country depending on the characteristics of the education system and the specific focus of interest in each national case study, the selection of schools was based on a criterion of heterogeneity. It considered aspects such as schools' socio-economic composition, ownership, and performance category, as well as the level of perceived pressure and their dispositions towards SAWA and performance-based accountability (PBA) in particular. As shown below, in total, we conducted qualitative fieldwork in 88 schools, and we interviewed 106 school leaders and 158 teachers (see Table 1).

A purposive sampling strategy was used to select the participants in the interviews (Patton, 2015). In each school, we interviewed at least the school principal, but we usually interviewed other staff members with leadership responsibilities. In the case of teachers, we differentiated between teachers who oversaw a course or subject assessed in the national census-based test and teachers who did not teach any of the subjects or student cohorts assessed in the census-based test. A letter of consent and a letter of information about the project were provided to all participants beforehand. The research protocol (number CEEAH 3280) was approved by the Ethics Committee on Animal and Human Research of the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (see Annex 3) following EU directives on private data protection and the recommendations elaborated by the Council of Europe and the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Dignity of the Human Being.

Overall, the interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes on average and were semi-structured – which means that the interviewer followed the interview guide, but remained flexible to delve deeper into relevant emerging issues that were raised by interviewees. All the interviews were transcribed verbatim and then analysed using ATLAS.ti software (see more details on interview coding below).

Table 1. Sample of schools and participants

		Schools	School leaders	Teachers
Chile	Public	7	11	10
	Private-subsidized	6	10	15
	Private	2	2	3
The Netherlands	Public	4	4	15
	Private-subsidized	2	2	5
Norway	Pubic	27	23	13
Madrid	Public	7	15	13
	Private-subsidized	4	10	10
	Private	2	2	4
Catalonia	Public	12	17	41
	Private-subsidized	3	3	9
Italy	Public	12	7	20
Total		**88**	**106**	**158**

Source: own elaboration

3.2. Data-collection tools: the interview guide

To conduct the interviews to school principals and teachers, the qualitative phase of RS2 relied on a semi-structured interview guide. This section presents the structure and the characteristics of the main modules of the guide, whose full content can be consulted in Annex 1. Despite some minor variations depending on the actor's role, the interview guides for principals and teachers are organized according to the following common modules.

The first module, on biographical information, tries to capture the background of principals and teachers, their working experience in school education, the roles and responsibilities they have had in schools, and their primary motivations for entering the teaching profession or becoming a principal.

The second module focuses on the school context. Starting from the premise that SAWA policies are not implemented in a vacuum (see Ball et al., 2012), through this module, we seek to investigate the cultural, social, historical and material elements that configure the school, since they will expectedly condition the enactment of SAWA policies.

The third module examines opinions and perceptions of pressure arising from TBA policies. Existing research has focused on the objective pressures of TBA systems. However, despite the importance of the objective 'performance status' of schools in the enactment of SAWA policies, less attention has been paid to the role of subjective or experienced pressure. In this module, questions are formulated to capture opinions on the standardised test, school performance, the alignment of school goals with the TBA system, perceptions about TBA pressures, the type of incentives or sanctions attached to performance results, and the actors who exert pressure.

The fourth module sought to capture schools' responses to SAWA policies. This module develops questions that focus on the adaptation and translation of SAWA policies in terms of organisational and pedagogical practices, and aims to identify the main drivers behind these changes. Specifically, we aim to understand whether these practices are the direct consequence of performance pressures, and how schools negotiate these pressures with other policy mandates – such as educational inclusion, innovation and so on. This module is also interested in finding out about data use practices in schools, and about school actors' perceptions regarding the relevance of performance data for their everyday work.

The fifth module deals with more concrete aspects of administrative accountability. In particular, this module focuses on the actors' understandings of SAWA policies and their specific implications for schools, the principal-agent relationship established with educational authorities, the public authorities' perception

of the school, the level of trust between the school and the authorities, and the functioning of the different consequences attached to students' performance in the standardised test.

The last module investigates so-called market accountability and explores the school's position in the local educational market in the view of school actors, and how do school actors engage with market forces in their immediate environment. It particularly focuses on the marketing strategies and students' selection mechanisms adopted by the schools (if any), the importance of performance data in attracting new families (or new family profiles), and the cooperative or competitive relationships established with neighbourhood schools.

4. Analytical strategy and data-analysis tools

The analysis of the interviews was organized in three phases.

In the *first phase*, the team distributed a sample of interview transcripts from each country and conducted a first round of coding following a structural coding approach (Saldaña, 2012) that was combined with analytic memos. The coding phase is crucial to identify "common themes, disconfirming evidence, and trends" (Lareau, 2021, p. 209). In this regard, Saldaña (2012, p. 83) suggests that "structural codes are generally foundation work for further detailed coding". This method uses question-based codes and is particularly useful to analyse large data sets (Namey et al., 2008), allowing the exploration and identification of common patterns, differences, as well as relationships among comparable segments from the data corpus (Guest et al., 2012; Saldaña, 2012). This strategy aims to facilitate the association of every fragment of the transcript with a theme (Fontdevila, 2019).

In the context of RS2, this first round of coding derived in the identification of 7 main groups of codes, which included participant's background, school context, school culture, policy interpretation, policy translation and practices, perceived pressure and expectations, as well as satisfaction and autonomy. Most of these codes were theory-driven codes (Hsie & Shannon, 2005) and/or corresponded to the main modules of the interview guide. These categories, in turn, were consistent with the theoretical underpinnings that oriented the research (namely, sense making and policy enactment theory), and captured the analytical distinction between policy interpretation and policy translation to gain a fine-grained understanding of policy implementation processes (Ball et al. 2012).

In the *second phase*, after defining and identifying this group of macro-codes, we conducted an in-depth analysis of a sample of interview transcripts from each country. To do so, in this second round of coding, we intended to apply analytic codes following a flexible coding strategy (Deterding & Waters, 2021) that combined theory-driven codes with context-sensitive inductive codes relevant in each specific country.

According to Deterding and Waters (2021), "analytic codes are conceived as concepts to explore in a single paper or chapter and integrate emergent findings with what is known from the literature" (p. 23). This set of analytic codes were grouped thematically within the macro-codes defined during the first stage of coding (see the final list of macrocodes and analytic codes in the Annex 2).

This process served to iteratively elaborate a codebook (MacQueen, et. al. 1998) inspired by the research questions, the theoretical foundations and the themes included in the interview guide. Similarly to the analytic process conducted in RS1 (see Fontdevila, 2019), in the context of RS2, the development of a set of analytical codes allowed refining the macro-codes by incorporating key concepts to analyse the different dimensions of policy enactment, school context and culture, as well as the causal mechanisms that explain schools' and actors' responses to SAWA identified by the literature. In this way, the codebook was used as a guide to analyse the transcripts of the interviews. It is important to note that this set of common analytical codes was combined with emerging categories specific to each country. In addition, a detailed description of the meaning of each code was included in the codebook to ensure consistency and coherence during the coding process (see an example of the structure of the codebook below).

Group	Code name	Code	Code description
School context	School inspectorate results	SCo_inspect	Used for any discussion of the inspector's 'quality decision' and overall or specific (dis)satisfaction with the school
	Position in education market	SCo_edu market	This includes the school's perceived reputation and its ability to attract students (also in relation to competition from other/nearby schools)
	School history	SCo_history	References to how has the school changed in the last years, especially in terms of student population, position in the LEM and similar

Finally, in the *third phase*, the qualitative strategy of RS2 complemented the analysis of semi-structured interviews with documentary analysis, which allowed us to gain a deeper understanding of the school context and its mediating role in policy enactment. In this sense, secondary data, such as the school education project, the school improvement plan, and/or the school website, were used to explore the school's history and context, the institutional project, and its pedagogical approach. Furthermore, this information was complemented and triangulated with the interviewees' discourses and accounts.

5. Challenges, lessons learned and future research directions

In this final section, we reflect on the main lessons learned, limitations, and possible future research directions that emerged from the data analysis.

Regarding the challenges of the study, it is important to underline that, despite we could conduct fieldwork in the number of schools that we planned, access to schools is an increasingly complex endeavour. The fact that the REFORMED project focused mainly on urban schools made access to the field even more challenging for different reasons. Firstly, these schools tend to be more over-studied than schools in other areas, since they are located in areas that are close to major universities and research centres. In addition, many schools are reluctant to participate in new research projects because consider they do not see the direct benefits of participating in these initiatives. Secondly, urban schools tend to experience higher levels of market and performance pressures than schools located in other areas. This is precisely the reason why we chose to focus on them, but this very reason is also behind their greater inclination to reject participating in academic research projects – since they have many other priorities and urgencies to address.

In many cases, principals expressed concerns about teachers' workload, so they agreed to participate in the qualitative phase but wanted to avoid involving teachers in this phase. Finally, in some cases (e.g., Chile, Catalonia [Spain], and the Netherlands), the political context (social revolts and teacher strikes) made access to the field difficult due to the total or partial closure of schools. This situation was later generalized due to the global health crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite these challenges are common to any type of school, it is important to note that access to private and private-subsidized schools was more difficult than to public schools. This is probably related to the fact that public schools, by their public service ethos, are more used to following transparency rules and are more open to engaging with external actors. Nonetheless, it is also worth mentioning that since the school actors we interviewed at this stage had responded to our survey in a previous stage, there was some level of commitment on their behalf to the research process, which is something that facilitated access.

During the design and pre-test phase of the interview script, modifications were made to the wording of some questions. For example, in the questions on test-based accountability and market pressures, we finally decided to formulate the questions in a more indirect way to avoid reactivity in the school actors' answers. It was also challenging to have a common script that applies to five different countries with different policy realities and SAWA configurations. For instance, some questions on accountability pressure generated much more actors' reflexivity in a country with a high-stakes system, such as the Chilean one, than in a country where the accountability system is low stakes and/or has played a less historical role than in Chile. In this regard, we tried to meet a compromise between comparability and

rigorous engagement with different school contexts.

Finally, despite the interviews allowed us to capture discourses, routines, and hidden norms that survey data and document analysis neglect, they also faced limitations in capturing certain internal school dynamics. To overcome these limitations, future research could embrace an ethnographic strategy that allows us to better capture key aspects related to the micro-politics of the school and the pedagogical practices enacted in the classroom in the context of SAWA regimes. Future research could also explore data-use practices at the school and classroom levels in more detail, as this is a topic that has evolved significantly with the development of learning analytics and artificial intelligence in education (Montefiore & Skedsmo, 2023). Among other possible lines of inquiry, research in this area could explore in more detail under what circumstances performance data can be used for equity purposes (e.g., to track the progress of all students over time, identify areas where instruction needs to be adjusted, and/or to adopt early targeted educational interventions) or, on the contrary, to reify existing inequalities by, for instance, stigmatizing certain groups of students or reinforcing low academic expectations.

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Annex 1: INTERVIEWS

Interview Guide 1: Principals and school leaders

Biographical Information

a) How long have you worked as a school principal?
   - And at this school?

b) Why did you decide to become a principal?

c) Do you also teach?
   - If yes, which groups/classes?
   - If yes, division of time?

1: School and school context

1) How would you describe this school?
   - Follow-up: Could you tell me a bit about the history of this school?
   - Follow-up: What would you say makes this school different from others?
2) What are the characteristics of students in terms of demographics (ethnicity, gender, and class)?
3) How would you describe parental engagement about the school and parents' role in supporting their children?
4) How would you describe this school's neighborhood? Have there been any changes recently?
   - Demographics
   - [possibly try to compare this neighborhood to other neighborhoods, e.g. where the principal has worked before]
5) What is the reputation of the school / What is your school known for?
   - Follow-up: how has this evolved?
6) Which [school development/success plan] are you working on right now? [mission/vision, pedagogical approach, school improvement plan]
7) Follow-up: What is it about? What are the main objectives included in the plan?
8) How do you evaluate whether you achieve the objectives of the school educational project/plan?
   - Follow-up: which are the tools you adopt for this purpose?

2: TBA Pressures

9) What do you consider are the most important objectives of your job [or what gives meaning to your work]?
10) What does it mean for you to offer a "good education" in this school?
11) In case not mentioned: how important is it for you that students perform academically?

- Why is it important/not so important?

12) What does performance in this school look like / do you have performance issues?
    - If not: what would you do if you had…?
    - If yes: what do you do about it? What are the specific strategies/actions you adopt to raise the learning outcomes of underperforming students?
13) Do you think external assessments can contribute to students' learning and performance?
14) How do you feel about the publication of test results? / If not made public, how would/did you feel about the publication of results?
15) What have been the consequences of (the results obtained in the) standardized tests in your school recently? /
16) Do you feel under pressure for the school to perform well in standardized tests?
    a. Why? (role of reputation, at the individual and school levels)
    b. Where is the pressure coming from?
    c. Do you think that teachers in this school experience a similar level of pressure to perform well?
17) How do you decide which students are exempted from taking the test?
18) (*See what formulation applies better*) What does the school do in case of below-expected performance in standardized tests / or to improve its performance in standardized tests?
19) And what does the school more generally speaking do to obtain good educational results?

3: Data use and responses

20) What kind of information do you find more useful to improve the instruction and performance of the school?
21) Do you have any procedure in place to analyze performance data – including the results of the school in standardized testing? If so, can you describe it?
22) Do you use the results of the standardized tests in this school?
    a. If so, how does it help you? Can you give an example?
    b. If not, why don't you use them?
23) Has standardized testing changed the work of teachers and teaching in this school?
    a. If so, how? (consider workload, teaching methods, focusing on particular subjects/topics, pressure/stress)
24) Have you resorted to external advice to analyze school results and/or improve the performance of this school? If so, which types of services have you contracted? Did these services fulfill their purpose? (in case the responses are too short: can you please elaborate a bit on this?)
25) Do you feel that the current emphasis on learning standards/outcomes and standardized testing is compatible with the [school's central mission/educational project]?
    a. If yes, why?

b. If not, why?

4: Administrative Accountability

Role and responses of the administrative account holder (Educational Authority, Municipality, School board, Inspectorate). Important: here, I would emphasize the role of the administrative body with more direct contact with the school (to avoid too opinionated responses)

26) Can you describe what the [inspection services/quality assurance agency/inspection services] emphasizes in the work of improving the schools in this municipality
27) How do you see their contribution to the improvement of this school?
28) Could you explain a situation in which [we can see this/their role has been particularly useful]? (adapt/choose based on the answer to the previous question)
    a. What would you like them to do differently? [ask only depending on the interview situation]
29) Do you feel the [municipal/educational] authority is too much concerned with the schools' performance? Why?
30) What kind of response do you receive from educational authorities regarding your school's performance in the standardized test (support, technical assistance, training, pressure) / how are results followed up by them?
31) Do you think that educational authorities trust sufficiently in the work that schools develop? Why? [distinguish education authorities if apply]
32) And do you think that society in general trusts sufficiently in the work that schools develop? Why?

5: Market environment

33) Why do you think parents choose to send their children to this school?
    - What sort of parents send their children here? (well-educated, religious background, native/migrant background)
34) How is this school perceived in comparison to other schools in the neighborhood? (explore competition discourses/perceptions)
35) Which type of families like/show interest in your educational project?
    - Why do you think it is that these families show interest in your educational project?
    - And do you do something particular to attract other types of families?
36) In case applicable: In case of overdemand, how do you decide which students will be given a spot at your school?
37) What do you do to get families to know about your school? How do you attract students to the school (advertising tactics, organization/approach of the school…)?
    - What are the aspects of this school that are most emphasized to parents to encourage them to enroll their children in this school?

38) Do families show interest in standardized test results? Why (not)?

39) In the survey, you say that you collaborate in [x networks].

- Do you find this network/collaboration initiative useful? why?

Wrap up

- Are there any issues that we haven't touched on that you would like to talk about?

Interview Guide 2: Teachers

0: Biographical Information

a) How long have you worked as a teacher?
   - And at this school?

b) Why did you decide to become a teacher?

c) What subjects/levels do you teach?

1: School and school context

1) How would you describe this school?
   - Follow-up: What would you say makes this school different from others?
2) How would you describe your experience working in this school?
   - Follow-up: leadership style, decision-making processes, collaboration among teachers
3) How would you describe the student body (in terms of demographics: ethnicity, class, gender)?
4) What is this school known for?
5) Which [school development/improvement projects] are you working on right now? [mission/vision, pedagogical approach, school improvement plan]

2: TBA Pressures

6) What do you consider the most important parts of your job?
   - If not mentioned: as a teacher, how important is it for you that students perform academically? Why is it important/not so important?
7) What does it mean for you to obtain good educational results?
   a. If not mentioned: how important is students' academic performance for you?
8) What does performance in this school look like / do you have performance issues?
   - If not: what would you do if you had…?
   - If yes: what do you do about it? What are the specific strategies/actions you adopt to raise the learning outcomes of underperforming students? (Follow up by asking for specific examples in the classroom)
9) How do you feel about standardized testing?
10) If applicable to the case, how do you feel about the publication of results?
11) What have been the consequences of standardized testing in your school?
12) Do you feel under pressure for your students to perform well in standardized tests? Why? / By whom?

13) Do you think the principal is pressured for the school's performance in standardized tests? Why? / By whom?
14) What does the school do in case of below-expected performance in standardized tests?
15) And what it does do to get good results?

3: Data use and pedagogical responses

16) How are the results communicated in your school?
17) How do you use the results of the standardized tests?
18) How does it help you?
19) Do you know if other teachers use this data similarly?
20) How has standardized testing changed your work? (consider workload, teaching methods, focusing on particular subjects/topics, pressure/stress)
21) Have you resorted to external advice to improve the performance of this school? If so, which types of services have you contracted? Did these services fulfill their purpose? (in case the responses are too short: can you please elaborate a bit on this?)

4: Administrative Accountability

Role and responses of the administrative account holder (Educational Authority, Municipality, School board, Inspectorate)

22) How would you describe your relationship with the principal? And with other members of the management/leadership team and educational authorities?
23) What do you think the leadership team values in teachers?
24) What kind of response do you receive from them regarding your students' performance in the standardized test (support, technical assistance, training, pressure, compliments)
25) How do you see their role?
26) What would you like them to do differently?
27) Could you explain a situation in which the principal/or another school leader has helped/offered support/punished/been absent because of your performance in standardized testing? (adapt/choose based on the answer to question 17)
28) Do you think that the inspection and other educational authorities trust sufficiently in the work that schools develop? Why do you think so?
29) Do you think that they (educational authorities: MoE, inspection, municipality) take into account the voices and concerns of teachers when making policy decisions?

5: Market/ cross-checking answers

30) How is this school perceived in the neighborhood? / What is the school's reputation?
31) Why do you think parents choose to send their children to this school?

- What sort of parents send their children here? (well-educated, religious background, native/migrant background)

32) And what about other schools in the neighborhood? (explore competition discourses/perceptions)

33) How does the school attract students (advertising tactics, organization/approach of the school…)?

34) Has this been successful? [For what kind of families?] [What type of families feel more … by these measures?] Do you know if the school is over-demanded?

35) How would you describe your relationship with students' parents/tutors?

36) Do families show interest in standardized test results? Why (not)?

Wrap up

- Are there any issues that we haven't touched on that you would like to talk about?

Annex 2: CODEBOOK

Interview codebook

Group	Code name	Code	Code description
General (2)	Actor's job role	Gen_job role	Actor's position (incl. job title, contracted hours, and any other formal roles/responsibilities)
	Actor's background and experience	Gen_background	To be used when actor's talk about their professional background… (when/how/why they came into their work)
School Context (7)	Student population	SCo_student pop	Includes any information about the schools' student population (its homo/heterogeneity, student/parent cultural/educational/financial background…)
	Family characteristics	Sco_families	Includes any information about family characteristics, involvement in the education on their kids, and involvement in the school. It also includes references to the role of parental associations.
	School setting & facilities	SCo_school set	Incudes any information about the surroundings and facilities of the school; environmental and/or socio-cultural characteristics of the area and school facilities such as sports/music/technology.
	Student/school results	SCo_results	To be used specifically in relation to the school's LVS & end test results, and the types of secondary schools graduates attend.
	School inspectorate results	SCo_inspect	Used for any discussion of the inspector's 'quality decision' and overall or specific (dis)satisfaction with the school
	Position in education market	SCo_edu market	This includes the school's perceived reputation and its ability to attract students (also in relation to competition from other/nearby schools)
	School history	SCo_history	References to how has the school changed in the last years, especially in terms of student population, position in the LEM and similar

School Culture (8)	Focus on student socio-emotional development	SCu_socio-emo	Discussion of actions/strategies/policies at the school or classroom level that focus on student well-being/pastoral care and overall (socio-emotional) development of the child. Also includes information about conflict resolution, the promotion of coexistence in the school/classroom
	Focus on academic achievement	SCu_academic	Discussion of actions/strategies/policies at the school or classroom level that specifically focus on student (test) performance/maximising academic achievement.
	Strategies for differentiation	SCu_differ	Includes any strategies at the school or classroom level to 'differentiate', track or tailor instruction to student abilities. This includes ability grouping (across the board) & strategies that focus specifically on higher performing students (e.g., 'plus classes').
	Strategies for inclusivity & equality	SCu_inclusive	Includes any strategies at the school or classroom level to incorporate students with various backgrounds and abilities. This includes all strategies aimed at lower performing students.
	Pedagogic approach	SCu_pedagogy	Discussion about the pedagogic approach of the school and the teacher, whether is more 'Classic' or student centred (i.e., more independent learning, including project-based working and emphasis of independent learning). Reflections on which strategies work better to promote effective learning also fit here
	Collegiality & cohesion	SCu_collegial	Used in reference to discussions about teachers' relationships with colleagues as well as with management. Also includes the extent to which teachers feel supported and involved in school decision making.
	Leadership style	SCu_leadership	Used when school actors' mention relevant aspects about the leadership style and the type of relationships between school leaders and teachers.
	Marketing strategies	SCu_marketing	Actions/strategies/policies of the school aimed at attracting new parents and/or particular types of parents, even when they are not conceived as marketing activities by the schools
School Enactment (1): interpretation (4)	Use of student test data/results and reflexivity generated	Enact1_ use of data	Used in relation to the teacher's/school's reception and reflection about performance data. Also includes the wider process around this use, such as holding staff or individual meetings to discuss results or to review teachers (formally or informally)

			It also includes interactions about performance data with various stakeholders, such as parents, media
	Importance given to results	Enact1_imp resuts	Used when school actors discuss their views on the importance of test results explicitly or implicitly. Includes signs that they (don't) measure their own ability as a teacher through results.
	Knowledge about TBA	Enact1_knowledg e	Used when school actors' mention aspects about the functioning of SAWA or TBA policies.
	Opinion about TBA	Enact1_opinion	Used when school actors' express their opinion about the fairness and validity of the test.
School Enactment (2): Translation in practices **(6)**	Test 'preparation' & narrowing the curriculum	Enact2_test prep	Relates to any activities conducted in the weeks/months prior to the standardised tests to prepare students in some way, and comments about ho
	Paperwork	Enact2_paperwo rk	Relates to the work following tests, inputting results to the computer and analysing data
	Alignment to core competences	Enact2_compete nces	Reflection on to what extent both pedagogy and evaluation practices in the classroom have been aligned to learning standards and core competences because of the TBA
	School improvement strategies and Class Plans	Enact2_improve ment plan	The longer-term teaching schedules teachers are (often) required to make to help ensure a coverage and understanding of the compulsory competencies as well as other school requirements… (these plans are often based on test results)
	Side undesired effects	Enact2_undesire d	Here we refer to the most undesired effects because of TBA: students' selection, tracking, triage, cheating
	Commercial services	Enact2_commer cialization	Use of external services and ICT materials with the specific objective of boosting learning outcomes
Perceived improvement pressure & expectations according to Source (8)	Perceived pressure	PP_general	Actors speaking in general about the pressure that they or others might feel that their students 'perform' academically (do well in tests) and any impacts of this pressure
	Pressure and expectations from parents	PP_parents	Actors* discussing the pressure they/others might feel from parents that their children achieve well in standardised tests.

	Pressure and expectations from self	PP_self	Actors discussing the (perceived) self-inflicted pressure for students to achieve well in standardised tests/achieve academically
	Pressure and expectations from school management	PP_management	Actors discussing the pressure they feel from the principal/management team/board for students to achieve in standardised tests/achieve academically
	Pressure and expectations from inspectorate and administration	PP_admin	Actors discussing the pressure they feel from the inspectorate for students to achieve in standardised tests and the school to be received favourably.
	Pressure and expectations from market demand	PP_market	Actors discussing the pressure they feel that students achieve well in tests/academically for the reputation of the school/to attract new parents
	Pressure and expectations from owner	PP_owner	private owner/foundation for private schools for public schools: municipalities (Chile, Norway), school board (The NL). In the case of public schools in Spain, use the PP_admin code
	Pressure and expectations from media	PP_media	Actors discussing the pressure they feel from the media, and how the school's results are presented in different media outlets.
Satisfaction & autonomy (3)	(Dis)Satisfaction with work tasks	Prof_satisfied	Teachers and principals talking (directly or indirectly) about their (dis)satisfaction with specific work tasks, or their work in general
	Beliefs about autonomy	Prof_autonomy	Teachers and principals talking (directly or indirectly) about their perceived level of pedagogical autonomy including perceived changes and how they feel about this.
	Ideal autonomy	Prof_ideal autonomy	Specific or general changes that teachers and principals would make to their tasks or to their working schedule

Annex 3: Information letter template and letter of consent

Information letter

Participation in the research project
"Reforming Schools Globally"

Information letter template

Reforming Schools Globally: A Multi-Scalar Analysis of Autonomy and Accountability Policies in the Education Sector (REFORMED) is a research project coordinated by the Autonomous University of Barcelona in collaboration with the University of [customize to each country case]. The project, which started in the summer of 2016, is funded by the European Research Council (ERC) and has the following reference number: StG-2015-680172. **In this letter we will give you information about the purpose of the project and what your participation will involve.**

Purpose of the project
REFORMED is an international research project, conducted in three countries in Europe (Norway, the Netherlands and Spain). The main purpose of the project is to investigate how policies that promote decentralization and school autonomy for municipalities and schools, in combination with accountability for centrally-defined objectives and results, are being enacted locally. We are therefore interested in examining how such policies are perceived, experienced, and put into practice by teachers, principals, and local education authorities in local schools, and what the effects of these policies are.

Why are you being asked to participate and what does participation involve for you?
During the autumn of 2018, we invite school leaders and teachers in a selection of compulsory schools in XX municipalities to participate in face-to-face semistructured interviews. Through these interviews, we aim to examine school leaders' and teachers' opinions and experiences with policy work, in addition to their perceptions on what it means to currently be a school leader/teacher. Municipalities have been selected to ensure a representative image of (semi) urban municipalities in [country Y]. Schools have been selected on the basis of size, geographical orientation, and school type. As a school leader/teacher in one of the selected schools, you are being asked to participate. If you chose to take part in the project, this will involve that you the participation in one face-to-face interview, which takes approximately 60 minutes. The interview includes questions about school organization dynamics and teaching practices, as well as your opinions and views on and experiences with current educational reforms.

What is in it for you?
By participating in this research project, you will make an indispensable contribution to knowledge development, while being able to make your voice heard and thereby to influence future reform decisions. **We want to make sure that participation in the project benefits schools**. In the [month/season] of 20XX,

we will organize a devolution seminar where we will present the main findings of the study. Municipalities' representatives, teachers and school leaders responding this survey will be invited to attend it. In addition, we will provide a report with the most important results and aggregated findings of this study to the municipalities and schools. Through our project, we aim to contribute to important and useful knowledge about reform work in schools, which can benefit school leaders and teachers in connection with future decisions about governance, accountability and school autonomy.

Your personal privacy – how we will store and use your personal data

Participation is voluntary and it is possible to withdraw at any time without the need to justify this. We will only use your personal data for the research purposes specified in this information letter. The audio of the interview will be taped and transcribed verbatim. **We will process your personal data based on your consent.** All data collected will be anonymized, stored, and processed in accordance with data protection legislation (the General Data Protection Regulation, Personal Data Act and the EUPR Data Protection Regulation). Participants will solely be identified by a unique identification number, while name and contact details will be erased. **No results can be traced back to municipalities, single schools or individuals**. The Autonomous University of Barcelona is the sole owner of the anonymised data until the end of the project (October, 2021).

Your rights

So long as you can be identified in the collected data, you have the right to:

- access the personal data that is being processed about you
- request that your personal data is deleted
- request that incorrect personal data about you is corrected/rectified
- receive a copy of your personal data (data portability), and
- send a complaint to the Data Protection Officer [details here]

Where can I find out more?

For more information about the project, see the project's website www.reformed-project.eu, which will be launched in November 2018, or feel free to contact us via XXXX

Yours sincerely,

Antoni Verger
Autonomous University of Barcelona
REFORMED principal investigator
antoni.verger@uab.cat

Letter of consent

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I, (NAME OF INTERVIEWEE), DO HEREBY GIVE MY CONSENT for researchers of the project REFORMED to use all the data I provide in the interview/focus group/questionnaire. Hereby, I also confirm that:

-I have been informed by the researchers of the REFORMED team about the content and objectives of the project, I have had the chance to make questions to them about the project and in case you have made questions their answers have been totally satisfactory.

- I give my permission to be taped. I understand that the information provided will be used only for research purposes and will not be used in a manner that would allow identification of my individual responses [only for interviews and focus groups].

- In case the REFORMED data is disclosed once the project is finished, I accept that the information I provided in the interview is disclosed only if this is done in a way that would avoid identification of my individual responses.

- I agree with participating in the REFORMED project as an interviewee. I understand that participation in the project is voluntary, and I can cancel my participation in the project without any consequences, at any time and without having to justify the reasons of the cancellation. If my participation is cancelled, I understand that the data coming from the interview will be deleted.

This Letter of Consent is being issued in _____ on _____ 20___

_____ _____

NAME OF PERSON AND SIGNATURE

NAME OF REFORMED RESEARCHER AND SIGNATURE